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Task force suggests high-tech measures for airport security

By John Woolfolk
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Eye scans, satellite tracking and digital video surveillance are among the technologies that Silicon Valley officials recommended Monday to bolster the San Jose airport's security and make travel more efficient for passengers.

A task force of valley high-tech leaders, convened in February by Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, and San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales, unveiled the report on cutting-edge innovations that could improve airport security. The aim is to incorporate these recommendations into a major expansion planned for Mineta San Jose International Airport, making it a national security model for post-Sept. 11 aviation.

``This is an effort to give current best-of-breed technologies new applications,'' Honda said. ``This is another example of how people of this valley are solution-oriented.''

The task force report will be presented to the San Jose City Council today and to federal Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta, who was once San Jose's mayor.

But it will be months before any of the recommendations could be put in place, Honda said. The report did not recommend specific products or assess actual costs. Ultimately, what equipment is installed will depend on how much federal authorities are willing to spend.

Because federal officials already are working to improve passenger and baggage screening, the task force focused on securing the airport itself and verifying the identity of its employees.

The group found weak control over airport employees, citing ``inconsistent standards, uneven oversight, poor enforcement.'' Interlopers could breach security by using false identification or by following employees through secured gates, the report concluded.

The report recommended using biometric identification systems that could verify workers by scanning an employee's palm or iris, the colored part of the eye. They could be combined with a network to locate employees at the airport.

Satellite and video tracking could be used to monitor the comings and goings of workers and concessionaires at airports so that access to the planes is more controlled, the report said.

The problem is daunting, the task force found, because ``various personnel belonging to several different commercial companies and government organizations require access,'' and ``a variety of materials including baggage, food, fuel and other cargo must be moved into and around the airport.''

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Possible solutions include putting global-positioning devices in employee cars to monitor their whereabouts and installing digital video surveillance cameras throughout the airport. Digital video provides a much sharper picture, and the system can be easily expanded.

San Jose Police Chief William Lansdowne said such technologies would allow his officers, who oversee and enforce airport security, to focus on passenger-screening lines without having to chase down false alarms for employee-security breaches. False alarms are now taking up a third of his officers' time at the airport.

``If they're doing that, they're not watching the lines,'' Lansdowne said.

Conscious of questions about an erosion of civil rights, the group argued that its recommendations would not infringe upon privacy rights.

``None of the recommended technology applications have the potential (as face recognition software would, for example) to radically change the amount of private information that airports, airlines or the government gathers about the public,'' the report stated.

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